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ON THE STUDY OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A MEANS OF ACQUIRING POWER¹

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In modern education the tendency is to train for power through self-expression, particularly for expression through the medium of art. The emphasis that is now placed upon the manual arts, including drawing and color, upon music, and especially upon English composition, or expression in language, is indicative of this tendency. Of all these avenues of expression that of language is the most fundamental. All thinking is done in words by a self-conscious mind, and the language that a man uses is the measure of his thought.

By virtue of its very intangibility, language is the most direct mode of communication from soul to soul, and attains a power over the mind of the listener beyond that of the more concrete expressions of thought. Beautiful as is Westminster Abbey, it has never swayed the hearts of men as has that hymn so often sung within its walls:

So long Thy power has blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on.

The first means of developing power is conceded to be association with nature. That man who has seen the majesty of the mountains, or the shimmer of the sea, who has known seed-time and harvest, has forever had his thoughts ennobled by the great Thought of which these are but the symbols. But nature alone does not suffice for the development of power. The first man, Adam, in a complete environment of nature, contributed only negatively to the world's advancement. The centuries through which man has toiled since then have testified that the curse of labor pronounced upon Adam was but a blessing in disguise.

¹ Paper read at the meeting of the N. E. A. at Asbury Park, N. J., July, 1905.

Man has learned that he earns not only his bread by the sweat of his brow, but his heaven also.

Looking farther along, we see Abraham a colossal figure towering over the great plains of Moab, surrounded by nature, yet not subdued by it. The care of flocks has given him food and shelter, has established the family and the altar. Truly, Abraham was a man of power. "The Hebrew patriarchs had small libraries, I think, if any," says the Autocrat, "yet they represent to our imaginations very complete ideas of manhood, and I think if we could ask in Abraham to dine with us men of letters next Saturday, we should feel honored by his company."

We have, however, the greatest embodiment of power in that man who had added to his personal experience with nature and in society, the experience of the great men of all time, found in literature and in art. In other words, the scholar is the man of power. Is not David a perfect example of one in whom these forces met? Did he not have contact with nature, the discipline that comes from labor and social intercourse, and in addition the culture of scholarship? We see him a shepherd lad wandering over the green hills of Judea, lying at night under the stars; a minstrel with music so sweet he comforts King Saul; a warrior so mighty his triumphs become a song; a king of wisdom so beautiful that he is forever the ideal of the Jews; but above all the divine Psalmist whose words express the most exalted thought of God ever conceived by man. Do we wonder that the man who was able through the alembic of his nature to distil such language from his experience in life was the progenitor of Him who said "Consider the lilies"?

With this idea that the power of any man is dependent upon the virility of his thought, and that his thought is the product of his living, we have come to a new notion of the relative importance of a number of things in the school. The old-time school with its barren drill upon the three R's has been incorporated into a fuller, richer school which attempts to develop the child by giving him life through nature, labor and scholarship and by training him in the use of language, the expression of that life in words.

This modern school is working under new conditions, the result of our rapidly increasing urban population. Its problem is how, on the one hand, to give to the city child that association with nature and that discipline of labor which his home environment does not supply, and how, on the other hand, to help him to realize upon the riches of literary culture with which he is surrounded. The child from the city tenement can have no such experience with nature as had the roving shepherd lad David, but he does have Tennyson and the

Flower in the crannied wall

and under happy conditions may just as truly know

What God and man is.

So much for the nurture of power in the child. Perhaps I have dwelt too long upon it, but the child in his lisping, and the statesman in his power delivers each in speech just what he has garnered from living. It is common enough to hear, "No impression without expression," but "No expression without impression" is a truth more fundamental, and one that is peculiarly true of expression in language.

This modern school is consciously organized as a social community in which each child as a member in full standing discusses his work freely and spontaneously with his fellows. This is in marked contrast to the old-time method in which the child recited his lesson from the book verbatim and solely to the teacher, and was not encouraged to reorganize its thought and make it fully his own. Now every lesson is consciously a language lesson, in which the teacher judges of the definiteness and accuracy of the child's concepts in arithmetic, in history or in geography, by the aptness of the words in which he clothes them. Moreover, the child himself is helped to clarify his thought in these subjects by expressing them in words of his own choosing.

In addition to this general work in language there is usually in the day's program a period devoted exclusively to the study of English composition. During this period there is practice in short themes as the most efficient means of developing facility and power. These themes fall into two main classes—the reproduction of classic models, and the composition of original exer-

cises. Reproduction exercises are not, strictly speaking, exercises in composition, but they are invaluable in giving the child those necessary tools of composition, vocabulary and style. Such exercises, however, are irksome to the child, who has naturally a passionate desire for self-expression. Following the dictates of modern thought in education, that a child best learns form not as a thing apart in itself, but as a necessary and most convenient mode of expressing his thought, original exercises have become the chief part of the composition work. In these he embodies all he has learned from the study of literary models and from the more formal instruction in the making of sentences, rules of syntax and the mechanics of writing. Thus he reveals to his teacher just what he has mastered, both in thought and form, and better than he could possibly do in any other way.

The recognition that language serves a distinctly social purpose has transformed the requirements in composition. The child no longer bends over long essays on "Friendship" or excerpts from encyclopædias which neither he nor any one else ever wishes to hear. Rather his exercise is the recital of some little thing which he has found interesting in his daily life, and which he knows his schoolmates will wish to hear.

Further, the mode of delivery has also changed to meet this social requirement. It is now often oral, or when written it is directly addressed to some person or persons. This social training is most stimulating to the child and helps him to find his place in the world. He learns that he must not only present his thoughts in logical order and in agreeable phrase, but also in that modulated voice and with that poise of body that accompany the speech of the well bred.

The choice of subjects for this composition work is limited only by the experience of the child and his power of comprehension. He talks or writes of what has appealed to him, and his teacher skilfully correlates his language expression with his observation work in his nature-study and geography, with his manual work and his little home tasks, and with his culture work in history and literature. The child writes on the opening of the spring buds as he saw them on his way to school, tells how he

made a sled, or dramatizes an episode from his history lesson. Of these exercises the last class gives him by far the greatest delight, because it affords his imagination free play.

Perhaps letter-writing is the most distinctly social form of written composition. A letter pre-supposes a person to whom it is addressed and between whom and the writer there is a common bond of interest. The following letter from Hans Christian Andersen to his little niece, Marie, was given at the mid-year test to our fourth-grade classes who had been preparing to celebrate the centenary of his birth, and they were asked to answer it:

DEAR LITTLE MARIE:

I am in the country now like you. . . . It is so nice, and I have had some strawberries — large, red strawberries, with cream. Have you had any? One can taste them right down in one's stomach. Yesterday I went down to the sea. . . . and sat on a rock by the shore. Presently a large white bird that they call a gull, came flying along. It flew right toward me, so that I fancied it would have slapped me with its wings; but, mercy on us, it said, "Mamaree!" "Why, what's the matter?" I asked. "Mama-ree!" it said again, and then, of course, I understood that "Ma-ma-ree" meant Marie. "Oh," said I, "then you bring me a greeting from Marie, that's what it is, eh?" "Ya-ya! Ma-ma-ree, Ma-ma-ree," it said. It couldn't say it any better than that, for it only knew the gull language, and that is not very much like ours. "Thanks for the greeting," said I, and off flew the gull. After that, as I was walking in the garden, a little sparrow came flying up. "I suppose you now have flown a long way?" said I. "Vit, vit" (far, far), it said. "Did you see Marie," I asked. "Tit, tit, tit" (often, often, often), it said. "Then give my greeting to Marie, for I suppose you are going back?" I said. "Lit, lit" (little, little), it replied. If it has not come yet, it will come later on, but first I'll send you this letter. You may feed the little bird, if you like, but you must not squeeze it. Now greet from me all good people, all sensible beasts and all the pretty flowers that wither before I see them. Isn't it nice to be in the country, to paddle in the water, to eat lots of nice things, and to get a letter from your sweetheart?

H. C. ANDERSEN.*

The personal appeal of the letter was so strong that though many of the children had never seen the sea or the sea bird of which Andersen wrote, though it was a cold January day with ice and sleet on the ground and more than all, though they knew that Hans Andersen is dead, their power of imagination under

* From Dye's *Letters and Letter Writing*.

the influence of the letter overcame all difficulties, and they responded astonishingly well. The following is typical of many others of equal quality:

INDIANAPOLIS, IND., January 11, 1905.

DEAR UNKIL:

Yes, I am in the country. I love to pick wild flowers. I found a bird nest full of young birds. But I didnt touch them for fear I would make the bird angry. I was sitting under the tree when presently the mother sparrow came and fed her young ones. Then she flew towards me and chirped. I could not understand. But after I got your letter, I knew that she brought a message from you. I gave the message to the gull to give to you. As you were speaking about strawberries and milk, I like to pick them myself, put them in my own saucer, skim the cream of the fresh milk, and put it on the berries, and have a little dinner. Then I am a fine lady with a cabbage-leaf hat. I pretend my bare feet is two big white horses and I ride acrost the stream. Once a craw fish pinched my toe and I fell down. I thought I would take a ride in the little boat, so I took the boat down to the deep part and jumped in. I sailed smoothly for a while. But directly I hit a rock, tumbled out and got all wet. You may be sure that I never sailed in that boat again.

Goodby Uncle Hans.

From your niece, Marie.

A recent experiment in story-telling in which the same picture was used in every grade, from the first through the eighth, was an interesting one. The picture chosen was the frontispiece to Henry Van Dyke's *Fisherman's Luck*.

A study of the construction of the compositions showed a steady increase in power and complexity of thought and form from grade to grade. The children were allowed to write for as long a time as they chose. In the second grade, the average composition contained three sentences, in the fourth grade nine sentences, in the sixth, twelve sentences, and in the eighth, fifteen sentences. The number of simple sentences decreased from 88 per cent. of the whole in the second grade, to 35 per cent. in the eighth. In the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades the sentences were very long and involved, showing that the child was grappling with thoughts which he could not yet fully express. From the beginning the adverbial clause was used, but there were not many adjective clauses until about the fourth grade, and then there continued to be about three times as many

adverbial clauses as adjective clauses. If this is universally true, as it probably is, it would indicate that the mind instinctively uses the relations of time, place and cause as more fundamental than embellishments through description.

A further study of the papers showed an increase in imagination and thought power from grade to grade, developing markedly about the fourth grade and gradually rising to the sixth, but showing a decided decrease in the seventh and eighth grades, where the child had grown self-conscious. In the earlier grades there was no past nor future to the stories. The social relations between the boys in the picture did not prompt explanation, and there was a painful recital of just how many fish each boy caught. In very few instances in any grade was the lunch omitted, and at night all had fried fish for supper.

Here is one of the stories written by an eight-year-old girl. You will notice what a direct and distinct style it has:

THE KIND BOYS

Once there were some boys who were very kind. One boy's name was Tom, and the other boy's name was John. They had a little brother. One day there mother called boys, the boys came.

Take your brother to the brook, she said.

They went back a little way from the brook. After a while they heard a cry.

That is brother, they said. They looked, yes it was. They ran and got him out. They would not let him sit so close to the brook any more.

There was a marked difference between the style of the boys' compositions and that of the girls'.

"How about a fishing trip, Tom," said Ned.

"I never caught anything when I went fishing," said Tom.

That was written by a boy. Quite in contrast to it is the following extract from a composition by a girl:

Harry is sitting in silence on the river bank with quiet leaf shadows running over his anxious face.

The idea of an ethical purpose necessarily underlying every story was evidently, though unconsciously, in the minds of many of the children. Carelessness and disobedience met sure and swift punishment. The boy who disobeyed his mother was stung

by bees or caught on his own fishhook. The children were significantly silent as to rewards of merit, picturing the world as it is often presented to them that a child should be good anyway. Indeed, if one had the insight, one could by reading these spontaneous exercises, find all that the child has stored from his life experience. He will express it there in concrete form, just as in the Psalms we find all the life of David: shepherd boy, minstrel, warrior, king, philosopher, poet.

The teacher's responsibility in this work cannot be overestimated. "Who is the Master?" says someone. "The one who awakens." "Who is the Scholar?" "The one who answers." What responsibility then rests upon him who dares to call forth a child's thought in language! How must he ever conceive himself as creator and artist making for this child his spiritual body! He must have what Froebel has called the "Glieder-ganzes," the view of the whole, and he must plan that this child, his creation, shall fill it beautifully, graciously, unctiously. Nay more, he should gradually awaken his pupil to a sense of his own destiny, that he may begin to mold himself in conformity to the great Ideal; so that day by day and year by year he may grow in foresight, in judgment, and in desire to serve the world. In other words, that he may become a man of power. And how shall you know a man? Says Confucius: "A man can never be hid."